

Chances Are

Author: CK (DrLizThirose)

Rating: PG

Summary: Chances are you find me somewhere on your road tonight...

Disclaimer: All Paramount. Sorry.

A/N: Takes place after Hunters and then goes AU, because you can't fit it into the timeline anymore as it is changed completely. The first date is taken from the stardate named in Hunters, and converted with a stardate calculator.

Lyrics and title are taken from "Chances Are", a song performed by Vonda Sheppard and Robert Downey Jr.

This is a romantic tale of some sort, telling a different story of Kathryn and Chakotay. I tried to stay true to the characters and still show how it could have been.

And just so you know - originally this was supposed to be a short fluffy story. Yeah. Then my muse got her hands on it.

*Chances are you'll find me / Somewhere on your road tonight / Seems I always end up driving by
Ever since I've known you / It just seems you're on my way / All the rules of logic don't apply*

August 2374

After rain, there always comes sunshine.

That was Tom Paris' comment after Voyager's first short contact with the Valeriji.

And indeed, this new race did strike everyone as the literal sunshine after a bad thunderstorm. Not only meant entering their region of space clearing Hirogen territory. It also meant being welcomed with open arms the moment the ship crossed the borders to this new region, and finding themselves amidst a very kind and benign race, open to visitors, new experiences and knowledge - something that Voyager's crew wasn't used to anymore. But here they were.

The welcome committee consisted of five ships; four small ones, about three times the size of a shuttle, and one bigger one, equaling the Intrepid class vessel from Earth. While the four smaller ones stayed behind, Voyager was hailed and greeted by the larger ship. A humanoid figure that mostly stood out optically from humans by its two vertical eye slits and the cartilage-like wreath that went from its shoulders up its necks, around the top of the head, and back down to the other shoulder, bowed as soon as it appeared in the view screen.

"Merry greetings, strangers. I am Ambassador Avelen, official representative of the Valeriji Alliance, here to kindly welcome you to our territories."

"Thank you very much, ambassador," Voyager's captain responded smiling, "My name is Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager. We're travelers and explorers from a far quadrant on our way home, and seek passage through your territories." The alien woman nodded.

"We are no one to stop or hinder one's journeys. Would you mind us coming aboard your ship to talk about all necessary specifics?"

"Not at all. We can beam you aboard immediately."

In no time, Voyager's senior staff found itself accompanied by Valeriji ambassadors Avelen and Toleni, an older and a younger female representative of the species. Seated in the briefing room, cordialities were exchanged and introductions made before both sides eagerly got into business. As much business as there was, at least. The Valeriji were no pig-headed negotiation partners who offered the little finger, and when someone tried to take it, suddenly lunged forward and grabbed the whole hand of the other. They were generous and open-minded, and if they kept at least half of what the first impression they made promised, Voyager biggest worry would be minor offenders Avelen made no secret of having in their otherwise peaceful society.

Captain Janeway and her senior officers learned that the territory the Valeriji claimed was incredibly wide. Or more, the systems inhabited by all planets and species that belonged to the Valeriji Alliance, some kind of Delta Quadrant variant of the Federation it seemed, was. At constant high warp speed - something technical restrictions made impossible - it would take Voyager around half a year to cross the distance.

Realistic calculations spoke of four years.

"Ambassador, as I said before, we would be very thankful if you could grant us passage through your territory. Seeing now how far it reaches, it is even more important to us, as flying through your space would shorten our journey significantly. Do you see any chance to make this possible?"

"Of course, captain! I would like to ask you to propose your intended route, so we can make some... arrangements. Some cultures in our alliance are quite shy and cautious when it comes to contact with guests, and we would like to announce your coming should you pass their planets."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Ensign Kim will give you all information you need and answer whatever else question you may have concerning our route."

Harry Kim, seated next to Toleni, studied the characteristics of her appearance closely and curiously; despite having found their look something he had to get used to at first, he now considered especially young Toleni, with her gentle nature and her regal but still modest demeanor, as exotically beautiful. He was so entranced by her that he didn't hear his captain call him; only when B'Elanna, beside him, nudged him with her foot against his leg, he took a confused look around.

"Ensign Kim, are you still with us?" Janeway asked, a trace of amusement in her voice when she saw how Toleni, in realization, laughed silently.

"Yes. Of course. I'm sorry, ma'am," he hastily confirmed and sat up straight, indicating that he was all ears. His friend Tom Paris, sitting across from him, shook his head and grinned. "The... um... maps. Right. I'll take care of it and show them to you, ambassador."

"Thank you." Avelen seemed to think for a moment, then continued, once again addressing the captain. "I will give you a map and a list of planets you are not to explore or contact. Some of the cultures do not want any contact to alien species other than the ones on their surrounding planets. If you like, I can also provide you with information on planets that may be suitable for you to spend free-time on, or that may hold food you can restock your supplies with."

Janeway clawed onto every straw that would help her to keep her composure. Her heart went out to these people who would hopefully - if this all wasn't but a dream - give her crew the chance to be freed of this permanent sword of Damocles hanging over their heads for a while. "We can never thank you for your kindness."

"No, really, captain, it is such a pleasure for us to meet new species and cultures, and I am sure yours will be a great enrichment. We are eager to learn everything about you and your history." With that, Avelen rose from her seat. "But for now, there are a few more important things I would like to talk to you about in private, captain. You and Commander Chakotay, specifically."

Voyager's officers exchanged curious glances, wondering what this could be about. Nevertheless, they obediently left the briefing room when the captain dismissed them, all of them but Chakotay. He remained with the two Valeriji ambassadors. As soon as the quiet had returned to the room, Avelen began to speak.

"There is something else I have to ask you to do. For you to be recognized as your ship's commanders by our people when you encounter them, you and Commander Chakotay need to undergo a traditional ritual. You have to understand, all species in the Valeriji Alliance once agreed to certain conditions; similar to what I understand is

the... hierarchic structure on your ship. Everyone claiming a certain rank or position within society, in profession or duty, even in families, is marked." Avelen didn't miss the slightly critical, if not worried, look the humans exchanged. "Commander, I assume you are familiar with marking rituals, seeing that you possess an identifying symbol yourself?" Unconsciously, Chakotay touched his tattoo when he nodded.

"Yes, my people use this to signify our heritage and honor our ancestors," he confirmed. The alien woman bowed her head shortly in acknowledgement.

"The mark you will receive from us will not be this prominent; in fact, it will only be visible to us. It will be applied by an age-old technique of energy-channeling and will not harm your bodies in any way. You are welcome to do a security check at the site where the ritual will be performed, and also scan all people and objects involved."

"Why only us? Or, why the two of us and not only one?" Janeway wanted to know; putting herself in possible danger was one thing - those strangers appeared trustworthy, but experience had told her to be better safe than sorry - but risking the health of one of her crewmembers was a completely different matter.

"You two are this ship's leaders, the first and second in command, are you not?" Both humans nodded, understanding that Avelen wasn't asking a rhetorical question, but indeed wanted to assure that she was right in her assumptions. "It is always the commanding *duo* that is respected as the ship's leaders. We have a long tradition of believing in the power of shared knowledge and wisdom in commanding a ship." Silently, both Janeway and Chakotay wondered for a moment whether Avelen was realizing that they didn't have the same standing, but the captain was the highest ranking officer and her first officer 'only' below her in command structure. On the other hand, the Valeriji ambassador had been talking about them as first and second in command, so the fact obviously was clear to her. Her next words seemed to confirm that. "But as I said before, it will change nothing for you; it will merely be an... information for our people that thus will also allow you free passage through our territories."

Voyager's commanding officers shared a short look; they didn't need to say a word, they knew each other well enough to talk with their eyes only.

"Then we will gladly follow your rules and rituals, ambassador," Janeway finally agreed.

"Thank you. You will be awaited at the Grand Center Plaza of our capital city tomorrow. We will notify you in time; the ritual has to be carried out when the second sun reaches its highest peak. All other information you may find useful will be transferred to your computer's database."

"Then we look forward to hearing from you." Bidding farewell to Avelen and Toloni, both ambassadors were led away by a security guard and brought to the transporter room to beam back to their ship.

Janeway and Chakotay remained in the briefing room a moment longer; both lost in their own thoughts until the captain spoke again.

"We should study the data they give us. Just to be sure."

"Agreed, Captain. I'll get to it as soon as they've transferred it."

Janeway nodded her thanks and watched him leave the room as well. A strange feeling settled in her stomach, some premonition she couldn't quite get a grab of. She willed herself to relax. These were friendly people, and until now, her initial impression had often been right. Here, she had had a good feeling from the first moment on. Tomorrow, they would follow their traditions and go through with this ritual. She and Chakotay would be marked as Voyager's leaders, just as Valeriji traditions asked for.

Nothing more.

=^=

The day was warm, but surprisingly, and despite two suns sharing their energy with the planet, not too hot. If anything, it was the perfect day for outdoor celebrations - for exactly what the Valeriji were preparing. The Grand Central Plaza was richly decorated and already filled with people when a delegation of Voyager crewmembers beamed down. They were greeted warm-heartedly, although it felt a bit like an attack, as countless curious citizens who wanted to know everything about their visitors surrounded them within seconds.

As soon as Avelen approached them, however, the masses immediately parted, and most of them bowed to show their respect.

"Welcome to our home world," the ambassador spoke, addressing their visitors - Voyager's captain and commander, Lieutenant Commander Tuvok with two security officers, Neelix, and Harry Kim, the latter on special request by Toleni, who appeared at his side and pulled him away before he had any chance to protest.

While Avelen talked to Janeway and Chakotay to explain the proceedings that would follow, the security team surveyed and scanned the area thoroughly. Expectedly, they found nothing suspicious.

Voyager's commanding duo was led to the middle of the plaza, and seated, their backs to each other, on low stone cubicles of a deep green color that was laced with golden streaks. They had to lean against each other, the backs and heads touching, and take each other's hands.

"The connection of your bodies will result in the markings," Avelen had explained before, "and your backs will be to each other because it symbolizes your support and deep trust for the other - even with your backs turned."

Four Valeriji equivalents to monks circled the pair as they sat, eyes closed, listening to a faint chanting coming from no particular direction. Soon, both humans felt a curious warmth build between their bodies, just where their shoulders connected. It slowly turned into heat that nonetheless wasn't uncomfortable, and flowed down their arms to their joined hands. Janeway felt a shudder go through her body, and realized that the same was happening to Chakotay; feelings they were not able to identify spread through every single cell and overwhelmed their senses for a moment.

And for the fraction of a second, all these sensations clarified to the impression of souls merging together.

=^=

Meanwhile, at the edge of the big main square, Harry Kim and Toleni had taken place on one of the wooden trunk-like seating arrangements. A careful, shy distance between them but nevertheless with their hands touching, they followed the whole ritual in silence, content to not be amidst all those people, the masses standing around Voyager's commanding duo. From where they sat they had a perfect view, as they'd chosen the side of the main square that led uphill.

"They look like such a happy couple. It is as if you can see the beauty of their romance around them in the air. They have a great future awaiting them, I am sure." Harry first looked incredulously at Toleni; then he laughed.

"No, you got that wrong. They're no couple," he corrected, still chuckling. He couldn't help himself; somehow, the idea of the captain and the commander as a romantic couple seemed completely unimaginable to him.

"But they are, Harry Kim. And they were just bonded to be recognized as such also throughout our region of space." The young ensign stared at the alien woman open-mouthed.

"You've got to be kidding me," he murmured and was met by a look of bewilderment. "I mean... They're our commanding duo," he said, louder now. "Nothing more. I thought you said the ritual is to-"

"Bind your commandeering couple properly, yes. As it is tradition, and demanded by our laws."

"But... they're just colleagues," Harry croaked his protest, a feeling of panic crawling up inside him.

"How can they be? They command a ship and a crew together."

"Yes. And...?"

"How can they be... *just colleagues*?" Toleni tasted the words on her tongue like they were some bitter elixir. "How can they command a ship together when they are not bonded partners in life?" Harry could only do so much as gape at her. "All of our ships, throughout Valeriji territory, are commandeered by bounded couples. It... is essential for the crews of our ships to see and feel the bond of love between their leaders. Only this assures that they will work together symbiotically. The commanders are like... like the mother and father of their crews. They can only function this way. And do Kathryn Janeway and Chakotay not resemble that to you?"

"No! Well... yes, in some way I guess they do, but..."

"See. You are a funny species. You were making fun of me, were you not?" Toleni laughed, a sound beautiful as that of a wind chime gently moved by a light breeze. But for once, Harry Kim couldn't admire the beauty of it. He could only stare at her and try to make a face that didn't show all the pain and shock and horror he felt. If he understood this correctly, his captain and commander had just been wedded. And it was too late to stop the ritual now, as it just of this second was announced to be completed. He heard Avelen congratulate the oblivious couple and thank them for respecting their traditions and laws, and how Janeway responded that it was their honor and pleasure.

When the Valeriji woman next to him exclaimed, "Your Kathryn Janeway and Chakotay are very lucky," Harry felt his heart drop into his toes.

And they will be furious when they find out, he thought and followed Toleni who pulled him with her into the middle of the festivities.

=^=

Voyager crew had decided to remain half a day longer than planned on the planet Avelen had invited them to. The celebrations had went on until morning hours, and Captain Janeway would have been the last one to deny her hard-working, dutiful crew a day off. If anyone deserved it, it was them.

Only when the sun began to set the next evening, the Starfleet vessel departed to resume its course home.

As Avelen had told them before, they encountered several ships on their way - already in the first few weeks. Other than that, their journey was uneventful. They scanned the area and avoided planets they'd been asked to keep their distance to; they made new acquaintances on other worlds, and collected first samples of what promised to soon turn into a supply of food so huge that it would probably feed them for the next thirty to forty years, minimum. The occasional chance meetings with other ships always turned out to be pleasant, interesting, sometimes even funny.

For the first time in years, Voyager's crew truly felt like they were traveling among friends.

January 2375

It was the fourth month and just another encounter, one of by now so many that only the computer was able to still keep track of them, that changed things.

"We're being hailed," Tuvok announced as calm as always.

And almost cheerily, Janeway replied, "On screen," while she stood up.

"Greetings. You must be the travelers from far away." The man whose face was filling the screen smiled and nodded.

"That we are. Kathryn Janeway of the Federation starship Voyager."

"Kal Hjinges," the stranger, of yet another species than Avelen and Toleni and some others they'd met, introduced himself. "My people populate the second planet in a row of four, about eight light years from here. This should also lie on your route. You're very welcome to visit us if you like."

"That sounds good. We'll consider it. Thanks."

"I won't be there; me and my wife are on our way to the Valeriji central planet," Kal Hjinges informed, looking back and forth between Janeway and Chakotay, who still sat in his chair, "so allow me to use this opportunity to wish you good travels. And may you're ship be blessed with many healthy offspring to continue your journey." Janeway smiled, years of practice hiding her growing irritation. This wasn't the first they'd heard these wishes. Nearly everyone they had had contact with had bid them similar things.

"Thank you." She hesitated for a moment, then added, "You too." After the screen had went blank, the captain turned around and approached her chair. "Interesting people," she stated, addressing no one in particular, and sat down, "There seems to be a high value to family and... reproduction to them."

Harry fidgeted in his seat, uncomfortable with the knowledge he possessed and felt the need to share with someone. And it got worse with every passing day. Until now, the commanding duo still didn't seem to suspect anything when it came to their 'connection'. But how long till they found out? How long till Janeway's statement turned into a question? He couldn't let them be embarrassed in front of the whole crew.

Collecting every last bit of courage he had, Harry stood and walked down from his station to the middle of the bridge.

"Captain, commander, may I speak with you in private? It is very urgent."

"Ensign Kim, you-" Tuvok began to reprimand the young Asian, but was stopped by his captain raising her hand. She saw the nervousness, the restlessness in the man before her and knew he would never approach them like this, so openly and directly, if there wasn't a very good reason.

"Both of us, Harry?" she asked, just to be sure, and moved her hand between her and Chakotay in a pointing gesture. Kim nodded.

"Yes, captain, it concerns both you and the commander." Janeway raised an eyebrow and looked over to her first officer, who appeared to be as clueless as she felt. "Well then. Commander, Ensign, my ready room, please."

=^=

Not even ten minutes later, Harry emerged from the captain's ready room again, face red with obvious embarrassment. Tom looked at him questioningly, but his friend only shook his head and went back to his station wordlessly.

Inside the ready room, it was as wordless as on the bridge. Neither Janeway nor Chakotay said a single word.

However, while Janeway may have been silent, she certainly wasn't calm.

She paced, then stopped. Then she began pacing again, picked up this and that, only to put it back forcefully. She paced some more, walked the steps in her ready room up, and then down again, and back up. Chakotay swore he even heard her growl. Finally, she sat down next to him on the couch.

"First, I evolve into some lizard being and have *children* with *Tom*. Now I'm *married* to you. What's next? Shared quarters with Tuvok?" Janeway groaned and leaned forward, burying her face in her hands. "At least I get the handsome men on this ship." She had muttered the words, and it had been so quiet and indistinctive even to her ears that she was sure he hadn't heard it. She wasn't on luck's good side, obviously.

"See, even now you can find something positive in it," the commander quipped in an attempt to lighten the mood, acknowledging the words he hadn't been supposed to hear, and she shot him a death glare.

"How can you be so calm?! We've been... cheated on. They married us, Chakotay! *Married!*"

"It's not exactly their fault, you know. We should have studied their traditions and history more thoroughly before agreeing to any ritual." Guilt graced his features for a moment. "I mean, I did. I just... I obviously misinterpreted something that sounded perfectly innocent. And nothing ever indicated, at any point, that this was a bonding ceremony. Not *that* kind, anyway." He put a reassuring hand on her arm. "There's no harm done, Kathryn. This is no bond that will be recognized by anyone beyond the borders of Valeriji space. No one demands anything of us." The hand on her arm squeezed gently. "Besides, there are worse things than us being married to each other, aren't there?" His voice was lowered and tinted with insecurity when he spoke his last question. She looked at him for a while; then turned away and huffed, shaking her head.

"You're probably right. At least we're married to each other and not some random alien." She rubbed her hands over her face. "I knew there was something wrong. This all was too good to be true."

"Kathryn, no one expects us to share quarters, hold hands all day, and become parents of half a dozen of children. They simply marked us as... belonging together, in a sense of commandeering this ship. So they believe that only couples can do that properly. That's okay. As long as they don't want any proof that we're romantic-" Her hand that suddenly descended on his mouth stopped him, her fingertips pressing his lips closed.

"Don't conjure up any ghosts we rather not have on this ship. Or between us," she said, but it was more a plea than a demand. Her hand left his mouth, and for a moment he missed the soft touch as much as she did.

"I didn't know you believed in the power of words," he smiled at her and let his hand wander down her arm to intertwine his fingers with hers and lift both their hands to his mouth, placing a gentle kiss on her skin. "Let me propose something. We tell the crew. Ask them to play along. Whoever asks will hear that we're happy in our relationship. Okay?"

Janeway considered his suggestion for long minutes. He was right; it was probably the best idea. But was it also a wise one? Tell the crew that their captain and commander had been accidentally married? She didn't even want to *think* about their reactions. Much less see or hear them. Chakotay, however, was once again reading her mind.

"Kathryn, the crew trusts you and loves you," he declared, almost forcefully so she would listen to him - and *hear* him. "They will recognize this as something that could be a problem, and nothing to take lightly or joke about. They are all professionals, and they stand behind you, behind us. You need to have faith in them, and yourself."

"I do have faith in them, Chakotay. But it could undermine our positions."

"We're not in an actual relationship." He sighed; he understood where this was going. "How about this: We tell the senior officers first. Then we assemble the complete crew in cargo bay two. We tell them together, and maybe give them the opportunity to ask questions. That also gives us the chance to see their reactions and avoid a risk of having the wrong news spread when we'd deal with smaller groups only. The senior officers can take care of the ship for this half hour or hour."

Once more she rubbed her hands over her face, and massaged her temples for a moment. Then she nodded.

"Okay. Let's do it that way."

=^=

Telling the senior officers was easy. After the first shock there was a cheeky comment from Tom, a seemingly displaced congratulation from Neelix - who ended his words with a wink - and a joke from the Doctor that earned him eye rolls from everyone present. But all in all, none of this was surprising or unusual. The team was close, and used to the daily craziness of the Delta Quadrant; their captain and commander suddenly being married wasn't throwing them off their balance. This was, compared to all their hardships of the past years, such a tiny problem in comparison that it more amused them than anything else.

The crew was a bit of a different topic.

Cargo bay two was crowded with over a hundred people, and the buzzing in the room was slowly giving Janeway, who waited with her first officer at one end of the room for everyone to arrive, a headache. Not that she didn't have one already.

Finally Tuvok informed the commanding duo via the comm. system that all crewmembers except for the senior staff were now in the cargo bay, and the two ship's leaders stepped up onto a small stage that allowed them to overlook the masses. Disciplined as they were, the crew turned silent within seconds, attentively watching their captain and waiting for her to speak; to tell them what all this was about. She didn't let them wait any longer.

"Most of you know that Commander Chakotay and I were asked by the Valeriji to participate in a ritual that would mark us as this ship's leaders. We thought it was meant only to prove our leadership to other ships we would meet in this territory. Nothing indicated otherwise also. However, we were now informed that there obviously was a... misunderstanding. The Valeriji believe that only couples can commandeer spaceships. So what we didn't know was that they thought we," she waved a hand between Chakotay and herself, "are a... romantic couple." Janeway stopped momentarily when she heard a few people gasp and some murmurs throughout the crowd. Only after her first officer asked them to remain quiet, she continued. "In that belief, they performed a ritual that resembles a wedding ceremony; only that we weren't aware of it at the time." More gasps, more murmur. Kathryn felt Chakotay's hand on her back and then heard his voice when he took over.

"The Valeriji strongly believe in the necessity of this bond between the commanding duo of a starship. We have no idea what would happen if they became aware that we aren't an actual couple." He had to bite his lip to suppress a smile when there were some disappointed sighs among the crew. So the rumors were true - he and Kathryn had some 'fans' who wanted them to be together. "Therefore, we have to ask you to stick to our story - that Captain Janeway and I are romantically involved and happy together. We have a long way ahead through Valeriji space and for now, it looks like it will be a peaceful one for a change. We like to keep it that way, and hope that is in your interest also. We know we ask much, because you may sooner or later be forced to lie, but we trust that our common goal of getting home as soon and with as few problems as possible helps you recognize the importance of all this." He took a moment to look around, meeting as many eye pairs as he could. "If you think you can't do in good conscience what we're asking, there is no need to be ashamed or frightened. Every one of you who would rather not lie may please leave the cargo bay now and come to the captain's ready room later."

Chakotay stepped back again to stand beside his captain as they both waited for their people's reaction; for who would leave the room. They waited five minutes; ten minutes. Some people were talking animatedly; others just stood there, facing the stage, faith and determination showing in their expressions. When the chatter died down and the room was once again filled with anticipatory silence, no one had left the cargo bay. They were all still there. The commanding duo smiled at each other.

"Thank you. I feel incredibly honored to have such a loyal crew." Janeway couldn't help but laugh lightly at the cheer that went through the crowd. "Now, I like you to listen closely. We'll tell you the story - our story - we've come up with. For security reasons, it won't be found in any log or database, so please pay attention."

Their little history was uncomplicated; something that was easy to remember. They bent real events and added to them, telling the crew how forced allies had soon recognized the other as their one true soul mate after their involuntary arrival in the Delta Quadrant; how the bond of their commanders also bound two different crews together. It sounded like a plausible story; it may have been a simple one, even a clichéd one, but nothing that was unbelievable. They knew it would work.

The crew would tell everyone who asked what was supposed to be the truth.

And other than that, they would simply ignore this connection that had never been given consent to.

=^=

So aside from those occasions it was necessary to deal with it, it was ignored. Ignored for one year.

The captain and her first officer learned to respond to greetings, learned to answer questions regarding their "happiness" so it wouldn't raise any suspicions. Only the crew knew the whole truth; and they all kept to themselves and stuck to the story and some other carefully plotted details to tell everyone who asked, on every planet they stopped at.

At some point, Janeway and Chakotay even fell into an easy routine of occasionally showing themselves affectionate towards the other when on the bridge and in communication with one of the vessels or planets they passed. Then Chakotay would put his arm around his captain's waist, or she would caress his cheek lightly. Sometimes, they'd interlace hands between their seats when they remained sitting during contact with the aliens.

The bridge crew thought nothing of it; they all accepted that their commanding duo was just playing along, like they all did. They even admired how well both captain and first officer played their roles in front of strangers, only to return to their normal command and friendship selves as soon as the screen went blank and the coast was clear again.

On duty, they were the perfect actors.

Janeway and Chakotay in private, however, was an entirely different thing.

Despite their mutual agreement that this was nothing but a misunderstanding with some alien species, they both noted that they grew closer with every passing month. Day, even. They spend more and more time together, shared several dinners a week as opposed to their one weekly meeting before, engaged in projects to increase Voyager's efficiency, and spent many late hours discussing, constructing, arguing. And laughing. In conclusion, they were a better command couple than they had ever been before.

That everyone noticed. It was hard to miss also, especially since their captain appeared carefree and happy, something many hadn't even thought her capable of. She sought more contact to the crew, spend as much time as she was able to spare in the mess hall, chatting with her people and listening to their problems.

For the first time since they'd been thrown into this quadrant, Voyager's crew could relish in the knowledge that there wasn't just another hostile alien gnawing at the back of their necks. Instead, they traveled in such peace it was almost blasphemous.

And found among them a captain who was walking their journey beside them, and not just in front of them anymore.

January 2376

"Come in!" she called when her door chime rang through her quarters. He was a little early, as usual; she was still trying to convince her replicator to just once be nice to her and their dinner. She knew it was of no use.

"Good evening, darling, how was your day?" Chakotay greeted her cheerily, and Janeway gave him a sarcastic smirk at that.

"You really want to spend some time in the brig, do you?"

"You would do that to your caring husband?"

"Chakotay - don't push it." It was a warning, good-natured, but also with an idea of seriousness in it. When he smiled apologetically, she accepted it; he loved to tease her with their accidental marriage, and she knew it. She didn't mind it that much either; just sometimes she felt the need to remind him that she was still his captain, regardless of how close they'd become. One might have called it a habit; for her it was a comfort zone she didn't intend to give up.

"What's for dinner?" he asked, effectively changing the subject, and placed the bottle of wine he'd brought on the dinner table. It was already set, and decorated with a flower bouquet and two single long candles Chakotay moved to light as he waited for her answer.

"Whatever it will come up with, this-"

"Kathryn," his amused voice interrupted her, "don't insult the ship, you know she can be very vengeful." Janeway huffed.

"She's such a... lady."

"Just like her captain." Chakotay winked at her and then offered her a glass he'd just filled with wine. She took it with a grateful smile and clinked it with his.

"To..."

"Our marriage? It's been over a year already, you know?" She shook her head at him.

"You really are a hopeless case."

"Gladly." Kathryn laughed; she enjoyed their exchanges immensely, though she would never openly tell him. But then, she would be surprised if he didn't know. He was the one person on this ship, this whole quadrant and maybe even beyond, who knew her best. Sometimes too good for her taste.

"To our crew," she suggested a toast she found more appropriate, and he chuckled, but agreed nevertheless. While she took a sip from the orange-colored liquid, she turned to look out of the viewport. They were passing the outer expanses of a nebula they'd taken their time to explore in the past two days, and she marveled at the beauty of the colorful space cloud.

Chakotay, on his part, marveled at yet another beauty - the one standing beside her. Lost in her thoughts, she watched the nebula flow past the ship with an intriguing aura of calmness around her, and not for the first time he felt his heart's attempt to settle on his tongue. In the past year, holding himself back from acting on his feelings had become harder than ever before. There were no distractions by any kind of enemy forces week after week; only more time spent together, more secrets between them revealed and shared.

And still, he was worried about her.

She had always been the great pretender. And she still was. He saw what no one else was able to recognize - because they didn't know her as well as he did, because she hid it skillfully. She was playing the happy wife during their alien encounters, just as she was playing the happy captain for her crew. And he might have even fallen for it, just like the rest. But in moments when she thought no one looked, or when she was alone with him, her façade slipped. Only now and then and only for the blink of an eye - and yet he never missed it.

Kathryn Janeway didn't live in the moment. She knew that sooner or later, their time in Valeriji space would end. Sooner or later, they would return to their fights for survival and justice and just another shortage of their journey home. There was a profound sadness and loneliness beneath that layer of happiness, in the depths of her blue eyes, even when they sparkled like they did now. It visibly pained her that everything they had now would come to an end, that the closeness she'd gained to her crew was doomed to dissolve into nothingness. Command decisions didn't leave much room for friends. Or anything else.

The time would come when everything they had now would be forgotten again.

She looked at him in confusion when he took her glass from her, and put it along with his on the table, before he turned to her to face him fully.

"I've been thinking," he began, hesitantly. "about... where this is going. It's been a year, Kathryn. I know we never talk about it. There were always so many other things on our minds, so ignoring it worked just fine. But now..." He stopped and waited for a moment, hoping she would know what he meant. She didn't disappoint him.

"Chakotay... this is... not a better time." She shook her head, her faint smile sympathetic, trying, as always, to disengage from this conversation as quickly as possible. To do exactly what he knew she would do - pull away and retreat into herself. But he didn't let her this time. He took her hands in his, lifted their intertwined fingers between them and held them close to his heart.

"But when is? You know how I feel about you, Kathryn." She averted her eyes at that, but he didn't let himself be distracted. "Listen to yourself, your heart. Only for a moment."

"Do I? Do I really know?" He frowned at her, and she slipped from his grasp to round the dinner table; bring some space between them. "Do I really know how you feel?" she asked again, her voice becoming weaker, what confused him even more. Or maybe it were only her words. "How can I know that when I don't allow myself to look and see? To listen? To feel? I can't do that, Chakotay. I can't forget my responsibility and let myself fall. I don't have that luxury. As much as... as..." She stopped, swallowed hardly. Then she looked up at him, who still stood where she'd left him, rooted to the floor, unmoving. "As much as I'd love to be with you... I can't let that happen. I am responsible for this whole crew, and that includes you. How am I supposed to sleep at night when I live in fear for the man I love once I allow these feelings?"

Chakotay felt himself swagger slightly the moment she admitted that she loved him. Although she hadn't said it directly, the words and the meaning behind them didn't leave any doubt.

"Why do you always feel that your responsibility doesn't allow you some happiness? We may be out here for another 30 or 40 years. Maybe longer. You live only once, Kathryn. I will not watch you wither away and die alone, while you deserve to be loved." Chakotay breathed hard, emotions boiling inside him.

"I am loved! Look at them, Chakotay. I have a whole crew who I consider my family, my friends-"

"And yet you're always only the captain," he stated, if not accused, with a sad look on his face. "We are a family, yes, and you love your crew, just like they love you. Even more now." He made a general gesture that was supposed to refer the time of their passage through Valeriji space. "I would never doubt that. But you don't let anyone get *close* to you. I see you sitting in the mess hall, chatting and laughing with the crew. But I also see you

keeping your distance. It's what you always do, Kathryn. How many times in the past five years have you been given the feeling that you can just for a moment free yourself of your burdens and be human? How many times have you been given the comfort of a simple embrace? If nothing else, at least let me give you that."

She shook her head. "Chakotay... I'm captain of this ship and I knew what I was getting into when I accepted the command."

"You knew you would be brought to the Delta Quadrant against your will and carry responsibility for several decades alone, without Starfleet command or others of an equal rank for you to turn to and ask for advice?" Now he sounded almost challenging. "I can't do this anymore, Kathryn. I can't continue to just watch and do nothing, while you can't even be happy here, although there are no immediate dangers and sorrows."

She opened her mouth to contradict his words - but realized that he was right. So instead, she only asked, *pleaded*, "Please, let's not go down this road."

"But I will. It is a road we've avoided for far too long," He began to round the table as well, closing in on her. She tried to escape, panic rising within her. But it was not panic or anxiety that he would hurt her. She was rather afraid that he could *heal* her.

He caught her before she had the chance to squeeze through the narrow space between the table and her couch, and backed her up against the room's corner behind her. The motion was barely noticeable, and still he saw her shake her head, just a little bit, like her own muscles were betraying her and keeping her from reacting more forcefully.

He stood close when one of his hands found her lower arm while the other came to rest on her hip. Then he pressed his forehead against hers, before sliding up to kiss her there, his hand coming up from her arm to cup her cheek and caress it. Kathryn wrapped her fingers around his wrist, with every intention to pull his hand away and free herself from his touch that was weakening her defenses, but she simply couldn't find the strength. A whispered "No" was her last attempt to remain strong, but it was too late already. She fell into his arms he wound around her at once, securely enclosing her small form.

Chakotay felt her tremble against him, her breathing ragged, like she'd just ran a marathon - the marathon that was her life. Her fingers dug into his sides as she held on to him and buried her face in his chest.

The lump in her throat grew with every second. The longer she stayed in his arms, the more she felt the weight on her shoulders lighten, the walls around her heart crumbling. She felt like she was able to breathe for the first time in years; just breathe, and do nothing else, think about nothing else, *worry* about nothing else. She allowed her mind to drift, to go blank for a few moments, and it felt wonderful. She knew he would protect her; whatever would happen now, as long as she stayed in his arms, he would shield her - from who she was, what she was, where she was.

"I'm here for you, Kathryn," he told her quietly while holding her close, "whenever you need me. You know that. Don't hesitate to come to me. I promised once to do everything to make your burden lighter, and I will keep that promise. I won't ask questions, and I won't judge when you need to drop the captain's mask and be yourself, and if only for a few precious moments." A tear then slipped from her eyes at his words, and soaked a spot of his uniform shirt. She watched it stain the grayish-blue material in the semi-darkness around her, before she finally lifted her head.

"Thank you." She couldn't say more right then.

"It is what we do for the people we love," he answered, the unmistakably gentle note in his voice making her close her eyes for a moment. He leaned down and brought his mouth to her ear, whispering his next words: "And we are married to."

She should have laughed and pushed him away, maybe playfully slapped him. And in any other situation, it was exactly what she would have done. But not in that moment. This was no part of his teasing routine; this was serious. His words made her shiver, and a deep sigh left her when he leaned back again. Their faces were so close that his breath moved the tiny hairs on her face, tickling and caressing her. In that moment, he could have done almost everything to her, and she wouldn't have pushed him away again. She was ready to let go. She felt safe, for the first time in many years. Safe and loved, in the way she needed to be loved. Desired to be loved.

Chakotay, on the other hand, fought with and against himself. He sensed that he could have kissed her then, and maybe even more. She was there, in his arms, so close like she had never been before, in more than just one way. But he also knew that he had brought her there; and he feared nothing more than this being just the infamous 'magic of the moment'. He didn't want to destroy their friendship - and what else this was - by following his impulses and his feelings for Kathryn.

Tenderly, he brushed his lips against hers; it wasn't enough to be a kiss, but it was more than anything they had ever shared. The sensation of her soft, warm lips, the taste of her he got an idea of, tested his self-control. But tonight was not when he would lose it. She had to come to him, willingly, on her own account and without any seduction. Only when she accepted him in her life, fully, he could be sure that they had a chance, a future, and that she wouldn't back away again.

For now, he was her friend, the one she hopefully understood she could turn to whenever she needed to. The one who wouldn't be her first officer, her subordinate, if only she allowed herself to think so for just a short while. The one who had broken through her defenses and was ready to catch her when the diminishing walls couldn't provide her with doubtful support any longer.

"Good night," he told her, his voice low, and slowly let go of her.

Janeway slumped back against the bulkhead when he retreated, watching him with confusion and longing equally. One embrace, one gesture of deep affection she had, since their mission with Voyager had started, never received, refused to receive, but only given, and he had made the armor encasing her heart and soul dissolve - and now he left her, vulnerable and on her own.

Only when the doors to her quarters shut after he had stepped out, she began to realize what he had done.

=^=

She didn't sleep that night.

She lay awake, reflecting on the evening over and over, his words sounding in her ears, his touch still lingering on her body, her skin; she could even feel his arms around her and his strong chest against her cheek. She contemplated everything that had happened in these past hours, and everything that had happened in the years before. In the end, it all came down to one truth: He was right.

Once she had sworn to herself that she would go her way, and not rely on others. That she would bring Voyager home; that she would carry the burden alone, because it was hers and no one else's. Her obligation, her debt; her fault. She was sure she could do it. Because she had to. There was just no other way. Who was she supposed to share her burden with anyway? It wouldn't have been fair to pass it on, even if only partly.

But as the years went by, the weight became more and more unbearable. Unmanageable. Even in this peaceful region of space, her heart and mind were still heavy with thoughts of an uncertain future. As strong as she willed herself to be, she would break. Some day, she would break. All she could do was fight as long as she was still able to, and then maybe a bit longer.

And she began to wonder if one day she would regret it that she was giving herself up in favor of her duties. Or if there was another way. Wasn't she allowed to take at least a helping hand when it was so willingly offered to her?

For the sake of her sanity, of her ability to lead and guide this ship and crew onwards, she knew she had to be. Because in the end, it wasn't about her. It was about what she could do for the people who were close to her heart; who she considered to be her family.

And that realization blew away the remaining debris of this wall around her heart she had thought for so long was the only thing to keep her safe and sane.

She may not have slept that night; but she slept many nights afterwards, more than she had in the years prior.

Chakotay hadn't taken her mission from her, her responsibilities. But his emphasized reassurance that he was there, the empathy behind it - something she had never before wanted to hear, but nonetheless had accepted so readily she surprised herself with it - gave her a feeling of something steeling her and holding her upright while she faced a walk through a raging storm.

From the day that followed this faithful night on, and with a little bit of subtle insistence from him, she let him in on her thoughts, her fears and sorrows; the biggest one then being about what would await them when they left Valeriji space. The crew was so used to this peaceful journey by now that she feared for their souls to perish when they would be confronted once again with constant fighting - against others and for their lives.

She also feared what would become of her and Chakotay, of their relationship, when there would have to be made difficult command decisions again. No one knew what lay ahead, and past incidents had shown how fragile something could be that otherwise always seemed to be so strong - and gave so much strength.

Her fears weren't unfounded. Minor difficulties occurred already when they were still in Valeriji territories. They disagreed and argued, and more than once their friendship, their unique bond, walked on the edge of an abyss.

They saved it every time.

With every new argument, and every reconciliation, it became clearer yet that they needed each other.

He held her, sometimes when they had a few minutes alone in her ready room, sometimes when they sat on her couch in her or his quarters. And sometimes even during the night. Then they'd lie in bed, his arms around her, and she would relish in that feeling of a soothing, safe cocoon he enclosed her in with his embrace, his body.

But one line they never once crossed.

It was curious. Kathryn and Chakotay had both always assumed that, when they allowed themselves to grow closer, the sparks between them - sparks they had never denied existed, but tried to keep in control - would make them catch fire. It seemed unavoidable. But the path their relationship had taken obviously was a different one.

What they had, what had evolved between them in the years of peaceful traveling through the star systems of the alliance, went beyond friendship. Maybe even beyond love. They were closer to each other than either of them could remember to ever have been to another person before. They trusted each other blindly, with their lives and hearts; they were true soul mates.

Only sometimes, physicality succeeded in conquering emotionality, and if only shortly.

August 2378

The picture they gave couldn't have been more domestic, more that of a married couple relaxing after work. Chakotay sat on her couch while Kathryn lay on it, her head on a pillow that was placed in his lap. Both were

reading PADDs - evaluating reports and new data, and checking the duty roster. The latter also was what made her frown.

"There's something wrong with that roster," she commented while still scrolling through the lists and tables.

Still half-busy with his own studying and thoughts, he simply asked, "Why?", but otherwise had his attention still on his reading device.

"The captain and the commander have too few shifts together." Now he finally looked at her and gave her a loop-sided grin.

"Says who?"

"Your wife."

"Suddenly, after four years, you claim your 'rights' as my legal partner, huh?"

"Let me rephrase my earlier answer - your captain *and* wife. Seems like you've drawn the short straw here, Chakotay." Kathryn laughed when she reached up and patted his cheek. Catching her hand, he brought it back down along her side and lowered his head towards her.

"On the contrary, *darling*," he gave back, only to freeze when he noticed the proximity of their faces his intention to appear more intimidating had brought them into. Their eyes locked and studied the other one's expression for a long time, before Janeway moved and sat up, clearing her throat. Immediately he missed the weight of her head on his legs.

"Are we through for today?" she asked, busying herself with arranging the PADDs strewn over her coffee table. His voice was deep and low, when he answered.

"With everything ship-related, yes."

Not looking at him, she dared to ask, "And with everything else?" She knew she was risking a lot by addressing an issue that had been hanging between them the whole time, however comfortable they were with their relationship as it was now.

"I don't think we'll ever be through with that." She looked back to where he still sat, motionless except for the slow rise and fall of his chest, and focused an intense gaze at her. Time stretched between them, tension became tangible. And then Kathryn leaned towards him, just the slightest bit. Before they knew what was happening, or what they were doing, Chakotay had her pinned beneath his body on the couch and they kissed passionately, wildly, surrendering to their feelings and attraction, devouring each other as a burning longing consumed them...

"Bridge to Captain Janeway." She had to force herself to leave his lips, still hot against her skin when she tapped her comm. badge and answered the Ensign Kim breathlessly. "Captain, I think you should come to the bridge." Janeway suppressed a moan she wasn't sure came from Chakotay's ministrations or her own frustration.

"What is it, Harry?"

"We got a communiqué from the Valeriji Alliance. They say they've discovered a ship just beyond the borders of their territories. They claim it has a Starfleet signature."

=^=

Leaving Valeriji space after nearly four years was not only about just returning into a universe filled with evil and malice. It also entailed major changes for the crew, in every and any sense.

The ship that indeed was Starfleet turned out to be one that had been pulled into the Delta Quadrant around the same time as Voyager. The USS Equinox under the command of Captain Rudi Ransom had taken bad damage over the years and mostly during a conflict with an unknown alien species. It was a smaller ship than Voyager, less powerful and by no means suitable for deep-space assignments, and it was almost a miracle they had survived this long.

At first, there was excitement. After traveling among friends for several years, the first ship they encountered was another Federation one. Allies, reinforcement; their very own and very first attachment to what might just become a small fleet in time. With combined resources another smaller ship wasn't outside the realm of possibilities; after all, Tom Paris had already proven that by building his version of a Delta Quadrant shuttle - bigger than their standard issue crafts, and with a lot more abilities than these tiny nutshells.

The more they learned about Equinox, her crew and their problems - or more, cause and reason for these problems - the more the initial enthusiasm was replaced by anger and disappointment. Ransom and his people had used sentient nucleogenic lifeforms as their energy source, torturing and killing them, and even under the aspect of their despair due to their situation, it was nothing either Janeway or her crew would ever forgive, leave alone tolerate.

Disagreements on how to treat the Equinox crew, and what right they had to be judge and executioner, had the commanding duo drift apart, despite their close bond. Some decisions the captain made left Chakotay shocked; he didn't recognize the woman before him. For the time being, nothing seemed to be left of a Kathryn who had become more easy-going and more open to him.

Only after the issue was finally resolved - with not much satisfying results at all, but at least with clear ones - they slowly found back to each other. No doubt their relationship had taken a few scratches, scratches they couldn't and didn't negate. It was a setback; they still had their friendship, and they also still had their deep trust, but whatever had started, whatever they had caught a glimpse of just before the Equinox affair had distracted them was lost.

The kiss they had shared, and the obvious passion for each other they carried inside was never once addressed. Especially Janeway avoided it the best she could - superstition kicking in as it seemed that every time they got too close, something or someone was already there to keep, *jerk* them apart. Theirs was an ill-fated romance, no doubt; surely they did better as friends and confidants only.

Chakotay was less convinced when it came to that. But he accepted the ordeal she saw herself confronted with; Kathryn was too important to him to harass her and cause her more trouble and sorrow than she already had to deal with. After all, he had promised to be there for her and make her burden lighter - and that included putting his own feelings and desires after hers.

Their lives didn't get easier as time went by; there were countless stones thrown into their way, if not heavy rocks. It got even as far as Janeway entertaining the thought of ending what, in most desperate times, seemed like a farce, and offer the crew to settle down on a nice and peaceful planet, maybe even return to Valeriji space. Chakotay however, knowing the tenor of the mood among their people, woke the warrior inside her again every time, helped her to keep fighting, now that they'd come such a long way already.

Their relationship recovered from the blows it had to take; they both took too much comfort in the other one's presence and support to give up what they had worked on for over seven years. It became a habit, just like it was one to suppress what they both really wanted. But as long as they were still Voyager's commanding duo, neither saw another way as to accept and savor what they had. Kathryn never stopped coming to him, seeking his warm, reassuring embrace and his kind, gentle words, and they spent many hours silently sitting or lying in each other's arms, drawing strength from their closeness before just another alien species attacked.

They were a married couple, more now that they didn't need to be one anymore. They shared the love and tenderness, the support and the disagreements, the arguments and reconciliations - just one thing they didn't share: a bed. Not in a sexual way at least. For two who had already acknowledged that they were undeniably

attracted to each other they showed an impressive discipline. In more than one way. Because they not only didn't surrender to their longing for each other, they also stayed faithful to their 'mate' and never took the opportunity to fulfill and relieve physical needs with another.

Sometime after the Equinox incident, Seven of Nine approached Chakotay and asked him for a date. In her own growing eagerness to explore human behavior and relationships, she had chosen him to teach her. He wasn't exactly sure why. But then, she was someone who didn't yet, and probably would never, have a full understanding of how the thing they called love worked. Thus, she naturally had chosen who was considered to be the alpha male on the ship - not solely because of his position.

Chakotay was swaying between being shocked and touched. Not because Seven had chosen him, no. She was a child in a woman's body, and certainly far from everything he wanted in a woman. He would never have claimed to not find her... well, she did give some erotic picture, a man's fantasy, and he recognized this. But she wasn't his fantasy, not at all. What equally shocked and touched him so much was that Kathryn was telling him to pursue this chance, this relationship, if he wanted to. She wanted him to have what she couldn't give him.

He told her that, as long as she was in his arms, he had everything he needed.

=^=

"Chakotay, you're as human as I am." They both sat on the couch in his quarters, turned towards each other. She had taken one of his hands, enclosing it between her small ones, and looked at him with deep, open honesty.

"And yet you advise me to enter into a relationship while you are still alone."

"You know there's no one on this ship I could possibly... start a..." She trailed off when he raised his eyebrows, an almost mocking glare aimed at her for a short moment. "You know what I mean." He exhaled audibly, the sound coming close to that of a deep sigh.

"Kathryn," he began, his voice gentle, and ducked down a bit to catch her lowered eyes with his, "I don't think I will ever know what you mean. Or understand it, for that matter." He smiled at her. "But I know that I don't care about other women." Now his smile turned into an impish one as he continued, "How could I, with a wife like you?"

Janeway rolled her eyes; more than four years, and he still didn't tire of teasing her with it. One could have called it a tradition of sorts; something they had only to themselves, something they didn't share with anyone else. While it had as much become a routine for the crew to refer to their commanding duo as a happily married couple without giving it a second thought as they had soon forgotten about the whole story after they'd cleared Valeriji territories, the couple in question constantly reminded each other of their connection. Mostly it was Chakotay, of course, but now and then, Kathryn found joy in it as well.

"Seriously, Chakotay, I can't ask you to wait and forego... you know... It's enough that I live like a nun." The last part had only been murmured, a dismissive wave of her hand figuratively trying to push the subject away from her.

"Life is about more than... *that*." He chuckled when she eyed him critically. "Do you really think a dinner date and maybe a passionate night with Seven, of all people, could be worth more to me than spending the evening with you instead? Maybe it is tempting for the moment. But in the long run? You are my soul mate, Kathryn. Even..." He looked down for a few seconds, then faced her again. "Even if I can't have you... all of you... for the time being. You're worth the wait." He finished with a gentle caress to her cheek, and in his face she read the love behind his vow.

"I promise not to let you wait too long," she whispered, and he pressed a chaste kiss to her lips before he pulled her close to him and tucked her head under his chin.

=^=

Two years later, when they led their ship back to the Alpha Quadrant, they did so while standing on the bridge - holding each other's hand.

August 2380

Their return was everything but glorious. At least to them. Of course they were celebrated, and wherever they appeared, if official occasions or just on the street, they were cheered at and sometimes even hugged. Voyager's fate had kept a whole planet, if not quadrant, in suspense; millions of people had waited for them to finally return from their long journey. They were heroes. And they didn't understand why.

In some way, it all felt wrong. They had found a wormhole by mere chance, and what initially seemed to be far too easy had turned out to be the solution. After securing everything, making sure that this wasn't trap, dream, fantasy, imagination, hell, even holo-image in open space, if that was possible, they maneuvered into the phenomenon. And it brought them back to the Alpha Quadrant within seconds.

Nine years after their journey had begun, they were home. Or at least they were where they had always seen home in. But for the crew of Voyager, a family of almost 160 men, women and children - many newborns among them whose home was indeed Voyager - it felt like a substitute for something they had found a lot more in than just the vessel that housed them for nearly a decade.

Debriefings were a quick affair, much to everyone's surprise. The admiralty reserved themselves the option to question one or the other, and especially Captain Janeway, later on, but other than that, they recognized that the crew had a lot to catch up on. In no time, those who used to be a family were strewn across the quadrant, visiting relatives, old home worlds, or simply places they had missed.

But as quickly as they had left, they came back again, seeking company of those they had become so close to in nine years of sharing every laugh and tear. And so the majority of Voyager's former crew settled down on Earth - always in transporter range to their friends, their makeshift family.

Even Chakotay, for whom returning to Trebus had been among his possible next steps, came to buy a cabin on the North American continent in the end.

And this was where Janeway found him after they hadn't seen each other in over two months - for two truly bonded ones an awfully long time.

The cabin reminded her a lot of their shelter they had lived in on the planet they had dubbed 'New Earth' and spent more than two months on, two years into their journey. But she could see that he had already begun to reconstruct the building, forming it after his ideas, making a home of it. In her, it woke fond memories of a long-past time.

She was confused that no one answered the door when she knocked. She knew he was there; since their Valeriji bonding ritual, she was always able to sense when he was around. Or maybe it was simply their close emotional connection.

The door wasn't locked when she tried the handle, and without hesitation, she walked inside - only to stop dead in her tracks the moment she entered the main room. This looked so familiar, but for reasons she couldn't fathom. Of course all his personal things were there, on the walls, the shelves, the furniture; every blanket and pillow that was carefully knitted or stitched, every wood carving he'd made and every stone he'd collected during their visits to countless Delta Quadrant planets, all the symbols of his native heritage. But that wasn't it. It was a feeling of home that overcame her, something she hadn't felt once since they'd left Voyager.

And even more so, it was a feeling of - *them*. Her and him. Kathryn and Chakotay. A unity. One.

She felt like she belonged here; like she was part of this house, his home. *Their* home.

"I heard you retired." The voice from behind her startled her, as well-known as it ever was. She whirled around to face him as he stood in the doorway to what was supposedly the kitchen, clad in loose-fitting pants and a short-sleeved shirt, a construction data PADD in his hands.

"That I did. It was about time I did something for myself." Her fingers thrummed nervously against her legs, he noticed.

"Kathryn Janeway, you never cease to amaze me."

"And I hope it will stay like this for a very long time." He raised his eyebrows at her words, but decided not to address it for now.

"I'm happy you are here," he said instead, and put the PADD away, but still kept his distance, curious to know what had brought her here - because he knew her well enough to see that there was something weighing on her mind.

"Do you remember what happened, to the day, six years ago?" He tilted his head, regarding her carefully.

"How could I forget?"

"It changed a lot."

"It changed everything." So few words, and yet they spoke volumes, told whole tales. Kathryn briefly closed her eyes; then, spreading her arms, like she was a bird spreading its wings to fly, she looked at him again.

"I'm free, Chakotay." It was all she said. Whispered. Breathless from expectation and anticipation she stood in the middle of the room, upright and proud; and still there was anxiety marring her beautiful features. Anxiety that, after all this time, he might just have given up waiting.

Not that she had anything to fear. She had come to him willingly - and it was all he needed to know. All he had ever waited for, never given up waiting for.

He shook his head.

"No, you're not," he disagreed with her declaration and slowly walked towards her. She stared at him with bewilderment.

When he reached her, he walked her back against one corner of the room, and his one hand went to her hip while the other cupped her cheek.

"You're mine." Heat spread along their shoulders and down their arms when she smiled in recognition and nodded.

"I'm yours."

And they sealed it with a kiss.

END

*And I'll be dreaming of the future / And hoping you'll be by my side
And in the morning I'll be longing / For the night, for the night*